

THE STERILISATION OF THE UNFIT

By HAVELOCK ELLIS

CONSIDERABLE interest has lately been aroused by the introduction in Switzerland—our chief European laboratory for political and social experiments—of the sterilisation of the unfit, not merely, on medical grounds, for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of the community. This has never taken place before in Europe. The facts are briefly as follows.¹ In the Swiss Cantonal Asylum at Wil (Berne) there were not long since four persons, two women and two men, who, though mentally slightly abnormal or defective, were not strictly insane, and the medical authorities wished to discharge them. The first was a young woman of 25, epileptic, and liable to attacks of insanity; she had had two children, who were epileptic idiots and a charge on the community; she was herself very strong and anxious to work. The second was a woman of 36, somewhat weak-minded and with occasional attacks of excitement. She also had had two illegitimate children who were a charge on the community. She was, however, a skilful worker. The third was a man of 31, physically well built, but psychically a degenerate and frequently coming into conflict with the law. The last was a man of 32, mentally superior but a sexual invert, who had fallen into the hands of the police for offences against minors. It should be said that sexual inclinations were strong in all four cases. The asylum authorities, however, naturally saw no medical reasons for retaining these persons indefinitely in an asylum. But the municipal authorities, on the other hand, resolutely opposed

¹ They are set forth more fully in various German periodicals, *e.g.*, "Sozialhygienische Kastration," *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift*, No. 2, 1909, and in an article by Profession Näcke, "Die Ersten Kastrationen aus Sozialen Gründen auf Europäischem Boden," *Neurologisches Centralblatt*, March 1, 1909.

their liberation, seeing no reason why they should be set loose on the community. Four more or less defective children already had to be provided for ; if liberation took place the number could not fail to be increased. There seems to have been a temporary deadlock. Sterilisation by castration offered a solution which was eagerly accepted by all parties,¹ not merely by the authorities but by the patients themselves and their relations ; the two men indeed demanded it, and one (the third case) even threatened to perform it on himself. The operation was duly carried out on all four patients, who were then set at liberty. The first has been at work ever since leaving the asylum and expresses herself as " content with her condition ; " the second is also able to earn her living. The third still commits theft at times, but has not been guilty of any sexual offences ; the same may be said of the fourth.

In commenting on this instructive experiment, which, it may be said, was perhaps more favourable in its results than we can always expect, I should like to be allowed to say that, personally, I have always been strongly opposed to sterilisation by this method, and I am so still. It is not even invariably effective, as some imagine it to be, in restraining sexual impulses, for those impulses may still persist in the brain. Moreover, there is excellent reason for believing that the internal secretions of the sexual glands in both sexes are highly important for the whole organism and by removing these glands we may be injuriously affecting the organism. So far, then, as the Swiss experiment involves such removal we are, I think, justified in refusing to accept it as a general solution of the difficulty. Nowadays, however, the question has put on a somewhat different aspect. Sterilisation of men can be effectively achieved by simple vasectomy or section of the *vas deferens*, and of women by the almost equally simple and harmless method of ligature of the Fallopian tubes (Kehrer's method as advocated by Kisch). It would appear that both these operations may be effected by skilled hands in a few minutes with a minimum of pain and inconvenience, and they possess the immense advantage that the

¹ Swiss alienists, I may remark, are unanimously in favour of the sterilisation of the mentally degenerate classes and hold that this matter should be regulated by law.

sexual glands are preserved, and no organ removed from the body.¹

It must always be remembered that the sterilisation of the unfit, if it is to be a practical and humane measure commanding general approval, must be voluntary on the part of the person undergoing it, and never compulsory. It is probable that many persons have been prejudiced against sterilisation, as I also have, by the reckless and violent manner in which the method of effecting it has been advocated, occasionally in England, and often in the United States. Persons who claimed to speak with authority, have clamoured for its adoption, sometimes even in its most brutal forms, not as a voluntarily adopted method of social hygiene but as a barbarous punishment, to be inflicted for the purpose of inspiring terror in others, and sometimes to be applied to persons whose acts were not really anti-social at all. I am still convinced that we were entirely justified in brushing aside such proposals without serious consideration. They are not in the line of our progress. Even if there were any chance of their adoption they would still be not truly effective. A man, almost certainly ill-balanced to start with, who is by force compelled to submit to such an operation, could scarcely fail to become still more unhinged mentally and still more disposed to play an anti-social part in life. It is essential that the refusal of the procreative part in life, as well as its acceptance, should be the outcome of a deliberate and responsible act of will. The Swiss experiment has shown that the recognition of this is not only advantageous but practical. No doubt, it may be said, the necessity for seclusion in the absence of sterilisation would exert a gentle but firm pressure in emphasising the advantages of the operation. There need be no objection to that.

The Royal Commission on the Care and Control of the Feeble-minded in its recent report—which has been everywhere received as an admirable statement of the case and the proper basis for legislation—was only able to advocate actual

¹ It is probable, also, that the method of sterilisation by X-rays may some day acquire practical importance. In this case there is no operation at all, though the effects do not last for more than a few years. This might be an advantage in some cases. See *British Medical Journal*, August 13th, 1904; *ib.* March 11th, 1905; *ib.* July 6th, 1907; *ib.* August 21st, 1909.

detention in particular cases. That is inevitable ; universal clostration might be neither advantageous nor practical. For the majority of the mentally defective, even if the Commissioners' comprehensive scheme for their care and control should be adopted, nothing will be possible beyond "oversight." But, even if we put aside eugenic considerations, is even "oversight" sufficient ? So far as the individual goes it will be beneficial. But no one could be simple enough to suppose that this oversight could be so complete as to prevent propagation. And if not, then little is achieved ; the burdens of society, to say nothing of the race, are merely being multiplied. It is not possible to view sterilisation with enthusiasm when applied to any class in the community. But when we are dealing with the unfit the resources of civilisation in this matter are limited. And if we reject the method of sterilisation, what, I ask myself, is the practical alternative ?